

"Dermatology:" The Name of the Game and Its Development

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No apology seems requisite for offering to the public a new account of Cutaneous diseases; . . . " (Robert Willan, introduction to the first fascicle of his book, London 1798) [1].

The following does not attempt to elaborate just another "account of cutaneous diseases" but will focus on the development of the term "dermatology" and its introduction into clinical medicine and medical literature. "No apology seems requisite" for this purpose either and particularly so in the leading journal in the field.

The present day vocabulary in medicine is largely the result of the creation de novo or trading down of ancient Greek and Latin terms, especially since the beginning of the Renaissance era in the 14th century and the concomitant recollection of the ancient Greek heritage. The famous Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) in a letter to Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) caustically comments on that development on December 10, 1364 [2,3],* and elsewhere [4].

The Greek terms "theology," "pathology," "physiology," and "surgery" (*chirurgia*), date back to antiquity [5], but "psychology" for instance, only to the sixteenth century. "Dermatology" (*dermatologia*) was created late in the 1700s. This story we will look into.

"Dermatology" (*dermatologia*) is a composite noun. It consists of i) the Greek word *derma* (skin), the stem of which is *dermat-*; ii) the composition vowel "o"; and iii) of the word *logos* (precept) in its abstract diversion *-logia*. "Epidermis," on the other hand, just as *derma*, relates back to ancient Greece and Hippocrates [6]. (*Cutis* is a Latin word also meaning skin.)

"Dermatology" (*dermatologia*) can first be traced back to Stephen Blancard's *Lexicon medicum*, edited by Jakob Friedrich Isenflamm [7] in 1777, calling dermatology the doctrine of the integument (p 411). A German edition of the same dictionary in 1788 gives an almost identical explanation ([8] p 714).

Another author speaks of "dermology" (*dermologie*) already in the year 1764, as reported in Jean-François Lavoisien's dictionary ([9], p 200). Dermatology and dermology are conceived as synonyms in several later dictionaries in the second quarter of the 19th century [10–13]. The fact that the terms dermology or dermatology could be found in dictionaries in 1764 and 1777 does not imply that these words were coined in these respective years. 1764 and 1777 constitute a so-called *terminus ante quem*, i.e., a point of time before which the terms must have been employed for the first time.

When the term "dermatology" first surfaced in or shortly before 1777 it closely paralleled the key dates of the foundation of what was to become clinical dermatology, in 1776 and 1777, namely, the publication of the treatises of Joseph Plenck (1735–1807), in Vienna [14], and of Charles-Anne Lorry (1726–1783), in Paris [15]. Neither author used the term *dermatologia*. The former author first listed efflorescences for classification of skin disease. The latter first called the skin an organ [16], albeit the mere semantic existence of today's designation of the specialty and the publication of the above two conceptual cornerstones did not by itself create clinical dermatology. Only after the oeuvre of Robert Willan (1757–1812) [1] and Jean-Louis Alibert (1768–1837) [17] stimulated a whole generation of pupils to work in this new field can we speak of dermatology as a clinical specialty.

Proof of this is the contemporary perspective of "dermatology" at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, actually comprising the teachings and knowledge of all membranes along inner and outer surfaces of the body [18,19]. Marie-François-Xavier Bichat's (1771–1802) book on human anatomy of 1802 [20] must be quoted in this context. Dermatology then was conceived as part of anatomy and/or physiology and was not understood as the delineation of skin diseases. *Dermatodes*, i.e., leathery, was one of the ancient epithets of the dura mater of the brain [5]. The clinical area of dermatology of today was called, more fittingly, "dermato-pathologia," by Seguin Henry Jackson in 1792 [21]. Willan eventually wrote in 1798 about skin diseases ". . . that the arrangement, description, and treatment of them constitute a branch of medicine which has never been sufficiently cultivated" [1]. This is witness to the fact that the field of dermatology was in the process of being developed as such.

We may conclude that the word "dermatology," being just one of the many synonyms (e.g., "dermiatria," "dermatiatra," "dermologia," "dermographia," "dermato-pathologia"), caught the attention of most of the contemporary authors. Moreover, this term was still free, in contrast to the potential designations of other upcoming specialties of the nineteenth century in which the *logos*-variant already was occupied ("psych-o-logy" for instance, in which case the new specialty had to be called "psych-i-try").

It took more than half a century till "dermatology" became accepted by the medical public as the name of a new specialty of medicine dealing exclusively with diseases of the skin [10,11]. Entries in general dictionaries of then [12] or of today, which refer to the first half of the nineteenth century as the relevant point of time [23–26] attest to that fact. For the naming of a medical gazette (1868 in Paris), a medical society (1869 in New York), and a professorial appointment (1864 in Vienna) it took slightly longer, notwithstanding the fact that the gradual acceptance of the designation *dermatologist* (dermologue, dermatologue, dermatologiste) also dates back to the very same period before mid-century. The whole development illustrates the increasing use of the expressions *dermatology* and *dermatologist* and, simultaneously, the definite establishment of a new medical specialty.

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* De audacia et pompa medicorum [2,3].

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